

SCHOOL CHOICE
SURVEY
IN THE STATE



School Choice for Tennessee:

Many agree with the concept. Some disagree. And some simply want more information. As the public debate continues to grow louder about how best to provide a quality education to all Tennessee children, it is critical to know the facts and to have a good understanding for public opinion.

This scientifically representative poll of 1,200 likely Tennessee voters measures public opinion on a range of K-12 education issues including school choice.

Tennessee's Opinion on K-12 Education and School Choice

Prepared By:
Paul DiPerna

The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice

March 2008

This poll released jointly by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Agudath Israel of America, American Legislative Council, Black Alliance for Educational Options, Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust, Tennessee Center for Policy Research, and Tennessee Tax Revolt, Inc.

A MESSAGE FROM THE FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION:

OUR CHALLENGE TO YOU

Our research adheres to the highest standards of scientific rigor. We know that one reason the school choice movement has achieved such great success is because the empirical evidence really does show that school choice works. More and more people are dropping their opposition to school choice as they become familiar with the large body of high-quality scientific studies that supports it. Having racked up a steady record of success through good science, why would we sabotage our credibility with junk science?

This is our answer to those who say we can't produce credible research because we aren't neutral about school choice. Some people think that good science can only be produced by researchers who have no opinions about the things they study. Like robots, these neutral researchers are supposed to carry out their analyses without actually thinking or caring about the subjects they study.

But what's the point of doing science in the first place if we're never allowed to come to any conclusions? Why would we want to stay neutral when some policies are solidly proven to work, and others are proven to fail?

That's why it's foolish to dismiss all the studies showing that school choice works on grounds that they were conducted by researchers who think that school choice works. If we take that approach, we would have to dismiss all the studies showing that smoking causes cancer, because all of them were conducted by researchers who think that smoking causes cancer. We would end up rejecting all science across the board.

The sensible approach is to accept studies that follow sound scientific methods, and reject those that don't. Science produces reliable empirical information, not because scientists are devoid of opinions and motives, but because the rigorous procedural rules of science prevent the researchers' opinions and motives from determining their results. If research adheres to scientific standards, its results can be relied upon no matter who conducted it. If not, then the biases of the researcher do become relevant, because lack of scientific rigor opens the door for those biases to affect the results.

So if you're skeptical about our research on school choice, this is our challenge to you: prove us wrong. Judge our work by scientific standards and see how it measures up. If you can find anything in our work that doesn't follow sound empirical methods, by all means say so. We welcome any and all scientific critique of our work. But if you can't find anything scientifically wrong with it, don't complain that our findings can't be true just because we're not neutral. That may make a good sound bite, but what lurks behind it is a flat rejection of science.

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Prepared By:

Paul DiPerna

The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice

Poll taken by:

Strategic Vision, LLC

March 2008



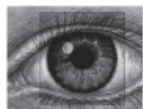
About the Author



Paul DiPerna (paul@friedmanfoundation.org) is a director of partner services for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, an organization dedicated to educating the public on the issue of school choice. He joined the Friedman Foundation in September 2006. Before moving to Indianapolis, DiPerna served as assistant director for the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution. His six years at Brookings included projects evaluating the federal Blue Ribbon Schools Program and analyzing student achievement in charter schools. DiPerna was a research analyst for the first five issues of the Brown Center Report on American Education (2000-2004), and he managed the activities of the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education (2001-2005).

DiPerna is fascinated by the potential of the Internet, particularly in terms of discovering and coordinating information, mobilizing people, building social networks, improving organization and management, and communicating innovations. He has presented research at the American Sociological Association annual conference, and has published articles in *Education Next*, *First Monday*, the *Washington Examiner*, and the *Journal of Information Technology Impact*.

About Strategic Vision, LLC



STRATEGIC VISION, LLC
CORPORATE, LITERARY, POLITICAL

Strategic Vision, LLC is an Atlanta-headquartered public relations and public affairs agency with a division that specializes in polling. Our team is knowledgeable about politics and current events throughout the nation and operates nationally on a variety of races and issue advocacy programs. Among the media that Strategic Vision's polls have been used by include FOX News Channel, *Newsweek*, *Bloomberg News*, *Time Magazine*, BBC, ABC News, Scripps Howard, the *Washington Times*, and *USA Today*. The company's polls have been cited as some of the most accurate by National Journal's Hotline.

Acknowledgments

Several questions contained in this survey have been adapted from earlier survey research conducted by Terry Moe, Paul Teske, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The author is grateful for the insights their surveys have given us regarding public opinion and school choice.

Terry M. Moe, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick, and Gabriel Kaplan, *Opening Doors: How Low-Income Parents Search for the Right School* (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007).

Thomas B. Fordham Institute, *Ohioans' Views on Education 2007* (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2007).

The author of this report takes sole responsibility for any errors or misrepresentations.

About the Sponsors

The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice



The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice is a nonprofit organization established in 1996. The origins of the foundation lie in the Friedmans' long-standing concern about the serious deficiencies in America's elementary and secondary public schools. The best way to improve the quality of education, they believe, is to enable all parents with the freedom to choose the schools that their children attend. The Friedman Foundation builds upon this vision, clarifies its meaning to the public and amplifies the national call for true education reform through school choice.

Agudath Israel of America



Agudath Israel of America is part of the world movement of Agudath Israel, which was founded in 1912 to mobilize Torah-loyal Jews for the perpetuation of authentic Judaism. Agudath Israel aims to establish the sovereignty of Torah in all problems facing Jewish people as individuals and as a nation. To achieve these aims, Agudath Israel of America maintains nineteen divisions of activity embracing every phase of Jewish life and affecting daily the lives of many thousands of Jews, young and old.

The American Legislative Exchange Council



The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) is the nation's largest nonpartisan, individual membership organization of state legislators, with over 2,400 legislator members from all fifty states, and 86 former members serving in the U.S. Congress.

Black Alliance for Educational Options



The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization whose mission is to actively support parental choice to empower families and increase quality educational options for Black children. Staunch in its belief that parental choice must be an integral part of any serious effort to reform education in America, BAEO believes parental choice programs, which lead to the creation of quality educational options, not only rescue the children who can take advantage of such opportunities but also create powerful incentives for all schools, public and private, to improve.

Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options



Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (CREO) was founded to address the crisis in Latino education by empowering Latino families with parental choice in education. By creating coalitions with parents, schools, faith-based organizations, advocates and like-minded groups, Hispanic CREO has been able to educate, inform and mobilize Latino parents on the issues surrounding school choice.

Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust



The mission of Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust (MOST) is to serve the low-income families of the Memphis community by establishing a stable, long-term funding source that opens doors to a variety of educational options, and gives parents the opportunity to choose the most appropriate school for their children.

Tennessee Center for Policy Research



The Tennessee Center for Policy Research is an independent, nonprofit and nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to providing concerned citizens, the media and public leaders with expert research and timely free market policy solutions to public policy issues in Tennessee. The Tennessee Center for Policy Research generates and encourages public policy remedies grounded in the ideas of liberty to achieve a freer, more prosperous Tennessee.

Tennessee Tax Revolt, Inc.



Tennessee Tax Revolt, Inc. is an all-volunteer, non-profit, non-partisan, statewide taxpayer advocacy group. We are working to protect the family budget from excessive taxation and for open, accountable government.

THE FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION

State Surveys

Nevada

January 2008

Illinois

December 2007

Georgia

April 2007

Florida

January 2006

Arizona

January 2005

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Executive Summary

This scientifically representative poll of 1,200 likely Tennessee voters measures public opinion on K-12 education issues. In particular, the poll emphasizes questions about school choice in the form of tax-credit scholarships, school vouchers and charter schools.

The state's most engaged citizens look like they are ready to move beyond customary debates deciding what educational programs and services should get how much more funding. Voters are content with the state's level of educational funding.

Tennesseans would like to see their K-12 universe transformed, so they have a range of school options spanning regular public schools, private schools, charter schools, homeschooling and virtual schools. Despite less than half of respondents knowing about school vouchers as a matter of public policy—and even fewer being familiar with charter schools—roughly the same numbers of people show favorability to these reforms. Poll findings suggest that public officials would perform a desirable public service by expanding the state's charter school options and improving the current system so it is more user-friendly. Respondents also seem willing to explore possible school choice systems utilizing school vouchers or tax-credit scholarships.

Conducted January 11-13, 2008, by Strategic Vision, the poll has a margin of error smaller than plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Key findings include:

- **Tennessee voters are not satisfied with the current system of regular public schools—52 percent rate Tennessee's public school system as "poor" or "fair."** A change in attitude appears to occur when people enter the age when they are most likely to be emotionally and financially invested in K-12 schooling, the 36 to 45 age group. The percentage of Tennesseans rating the public school system as "excellent" or "good" drops from **32 percent** (age 26 to 35) to **23 percent** (age 36 to 45). Satisfaction numbers are low and declining in the years when a parent or guardian is most engaged with schooling.
- **Tennesseans seem content with the current level of public school funding as well as the average public school teacher salary.** Nearly eight out of ten likely voters (**79 percent**) say Tennessee's level of public school funding is "about right" or "too high." The same percentage of respondents (**79 percent**) also believes the average Tennessee public school teacher salary is "about right" or "too high."
- **Only 15 percent of Tennesseans say a regular public school is the top choice for their child's school. The evidence indicates Tennessee voters want more school options.** This finding is consistent across major demographic categories. The preference for public schools dips as low as **11 percent** for women, 46 to 55 year-olds, Asians and east Tennesseans; **12 percent** for 36 to 45 year-olds, African-Americans and Chattanoogaans.
- **Tennessee voters value private schools and charter schools.** When asked, "What type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child?", Tennesseans prefer private schools (**37 percent**) over other types of schools. Charter schools (**28 percent**) are the second most desired option.
- **Tennesseans are open to school choice reforms—46 percent express favorability to charter schools and 45 percent say they are favorable to school vouchers.** Among 36 to 55 year-olds, favorability jumps for school vouchers (**50 percent**) and charter schools (**55 percent**).

- **Voters most familiar with school vouchers and charter schools are favorable to these reforms.** Among those who are “very familiar” or “somewhat familiar” with a school voucher approach to financing education, **52 percent** say they are favorable to school vouchers. Among those who are “very familiar” or “somewhat familiar” with charter schools, **63 percent** say they are favorable to charters.
- **Tennesseans favor a corporate tax-credit scholarship system.** When asked what they would think “if a proposal were made in Tennessee to create a tax-credit scholarship system,” **52 percent** say they favor this policy. The middle age groups appear to be the strongest proponents. The age group of 36 to 55 year-olds showed a higher rate of favorability more than any other demographic (**nearly 60 percent**).
- **Tennessee voters also support a special needs scholarship system.** When asked, “If a proposal were made in Tennessee to create a special needs scholarship system, would you favor or oppose such an idea?” **55 percent** say the favor this policy. Support for special education scholarships increases to **nearly 60 percent** among 36 to 55 year-olds.
- **Over half of Tennesseans (54 percent) cite “academic quality” or “school curriculum” as the main reason they would choose a particular type of school as the best type for their child.** This finding is consistent across all major demographic categories. Academic quality is the most frequent reason for all demographic subgroups spanning age, race/ethnic categories, gender and geographic region.
- **Tennessee voters are more likely to vote for a state representative, state senator or governor who supports school vouchers—32 percent** saying “more likely” versus 21 percent saying “less likely.” Among 36 to 55 year-olds, this potential voting gap widens to approximately **15 percentage points**.
- **Knowledge about school choice is at a low baseline in Tennessee.** A majority of Tennessee likely voters (**53 percent**) had never heard about “the use of school vouchers in K-12 education.” This knowledge deficit is surprisingly higher when compared to recently polled states like Nevada (**33 percent**) and Illinois (**38 percent**). Almost two-thirds of Tennessee voters (**66 percent**) are either “not very familiar” or “not familiar at all” with charter schools.
- **Tennessee school choice advocates have the opportunity to reach out to families and communities and inform them about school choice reforms—covering school voucher systems and charter schools.** Building local relationships and networks, communications and messaging are likely to be vital activities for Tennessee school choice advocates in the future.

Method

This survey provides a statistically valid representation of the views of likely Tennessee voters. A total of 1,200 completed interviews were obtained. This provides statistical significance more than sufficient for decision-making purposes. The statistical margin of error at the conventional 95 percent confidence level is smaller than plus or minus 3 percentage points.

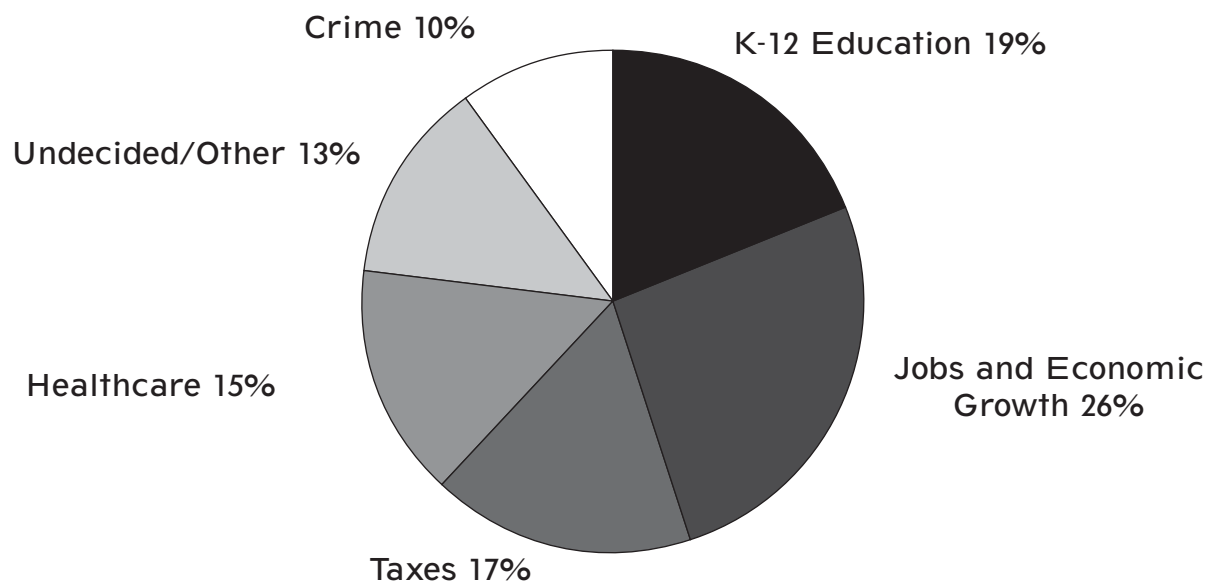
For this survey, the research firm Strategic Vision conducted phone interviews of a random sample of registered Tennessee voters from its call center. Interviews were conducted from January 11 to 13, 2008.

Respondents were asked whether they had voted in the 2006 election and were planning to vote in the next election in 2008. Respondents who satisfied both these criteria were classified as “likely voters” and were included in the survey. Respondents who either did not vote in 2006 or were not likely to vote in the next election were not included.

Results

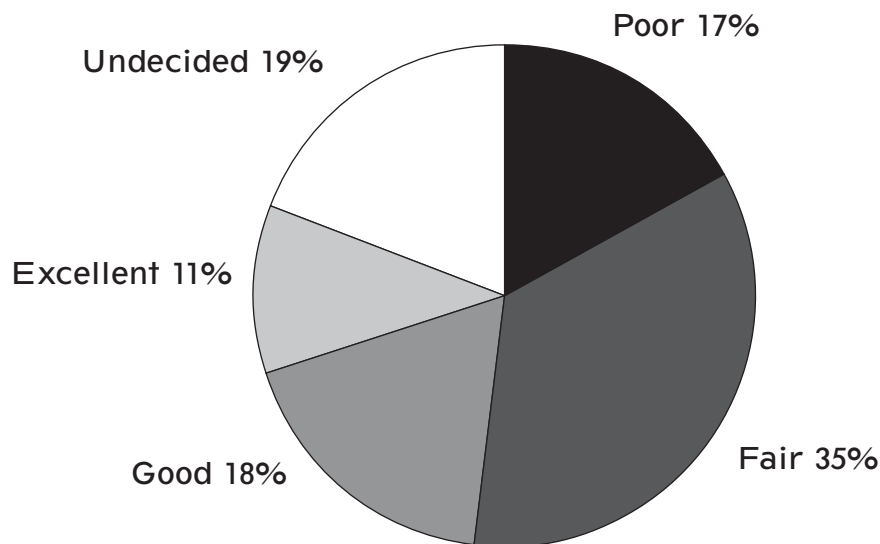
The following are the results of the survey.

1. I am going to name several issues facing the State of Tennessee, and I would like you to select the one that is most important to you? _____

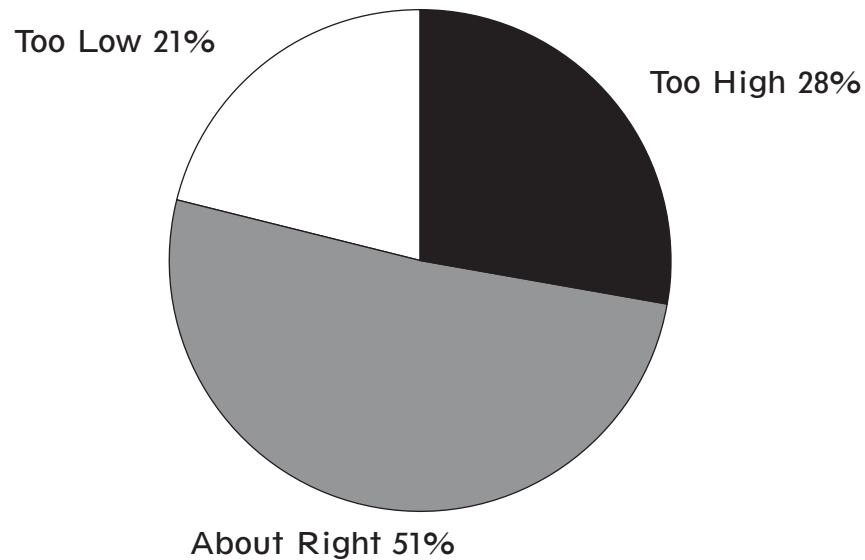


The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.

2. How would you rate Tennessee's public school system? _____

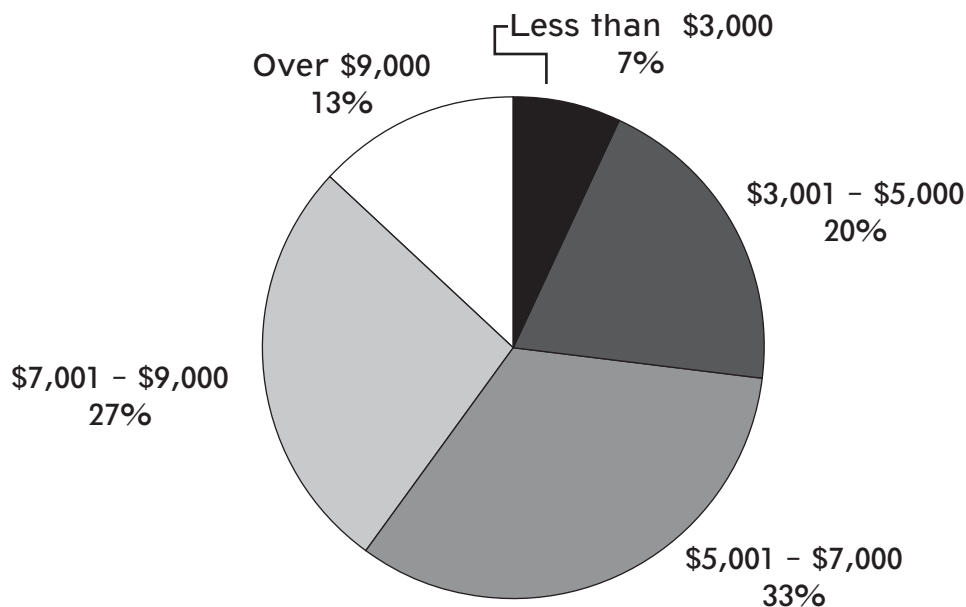


3. Do you believe that public school funding in Tennessee is at a level that is: _____



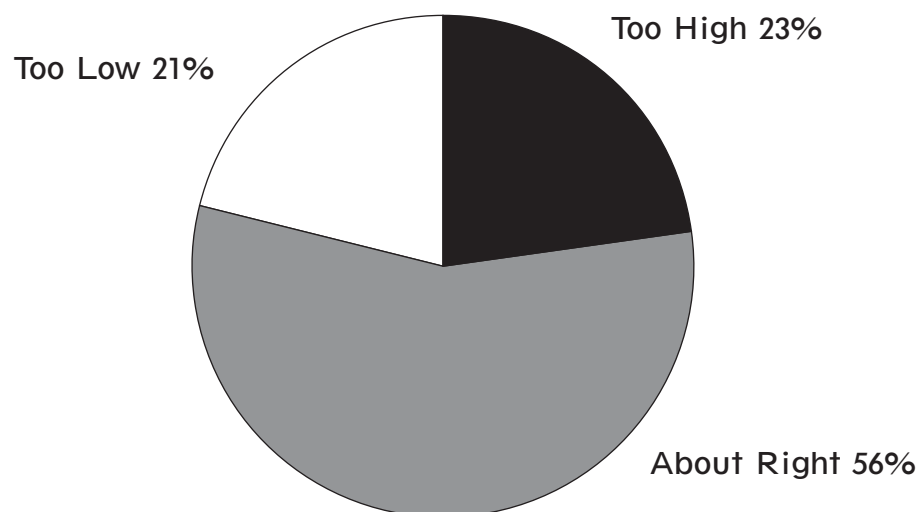
4. Approximately how much do you think the State of Tennessee currently spends on each student in public schools?

Actual 2005 school year figure: \$7,576*



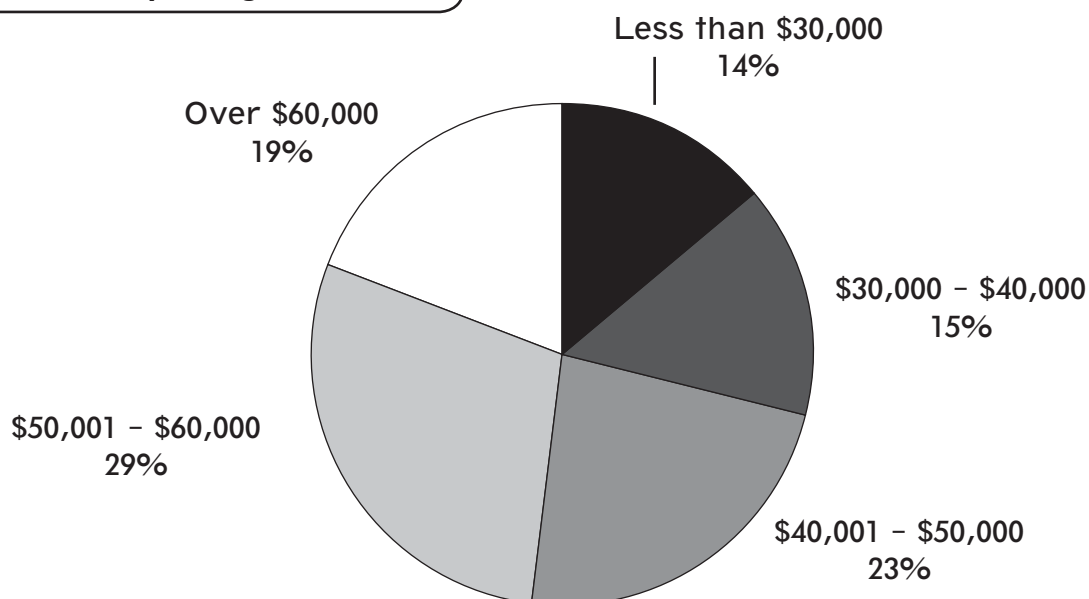
*National Center for Education Statistics, "Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2004-05," published April 2007
Calculated by dividing Tennessee's total expenditures (Table 8) by Tennessee's fall 2004 student membership (Table 3).

5. Do you believe that the average salary for Tennessee public school teachers is:



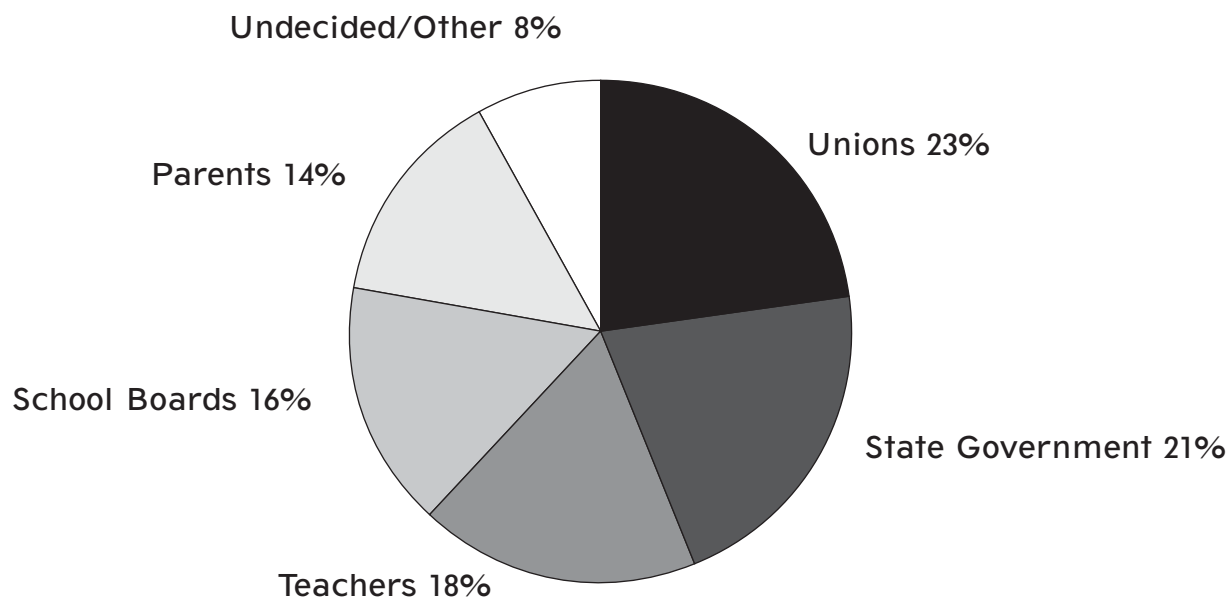
6. Approximately how much do you think is the average salary for Tennessee public school teachers?

Actual 2005 school year figure: \$41,527*



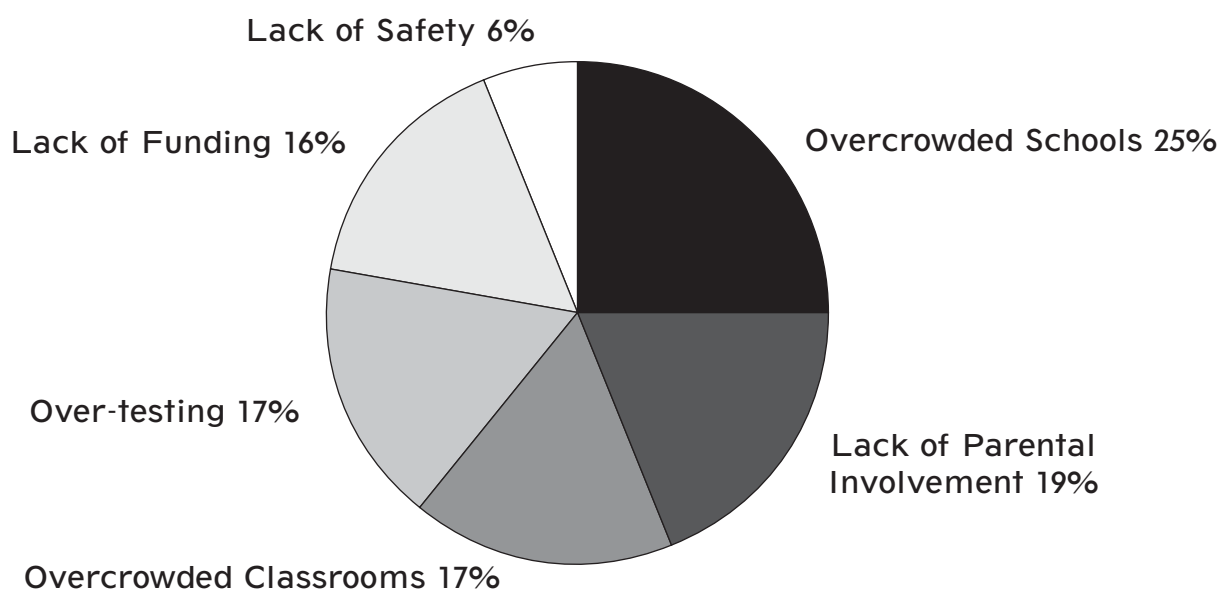
*National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2006, published July 2007

7. Who is most responsible for the situation of Tennessee's public school system?



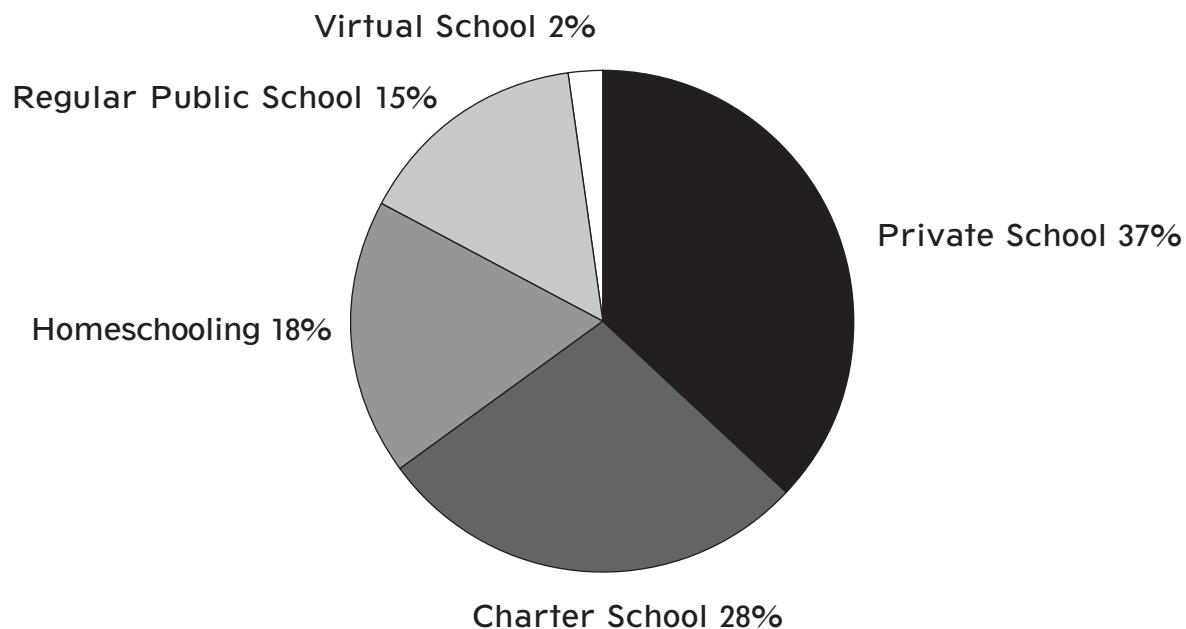
The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.

8. What do you see as the biggest challenge confronting Tennessee's public school system?



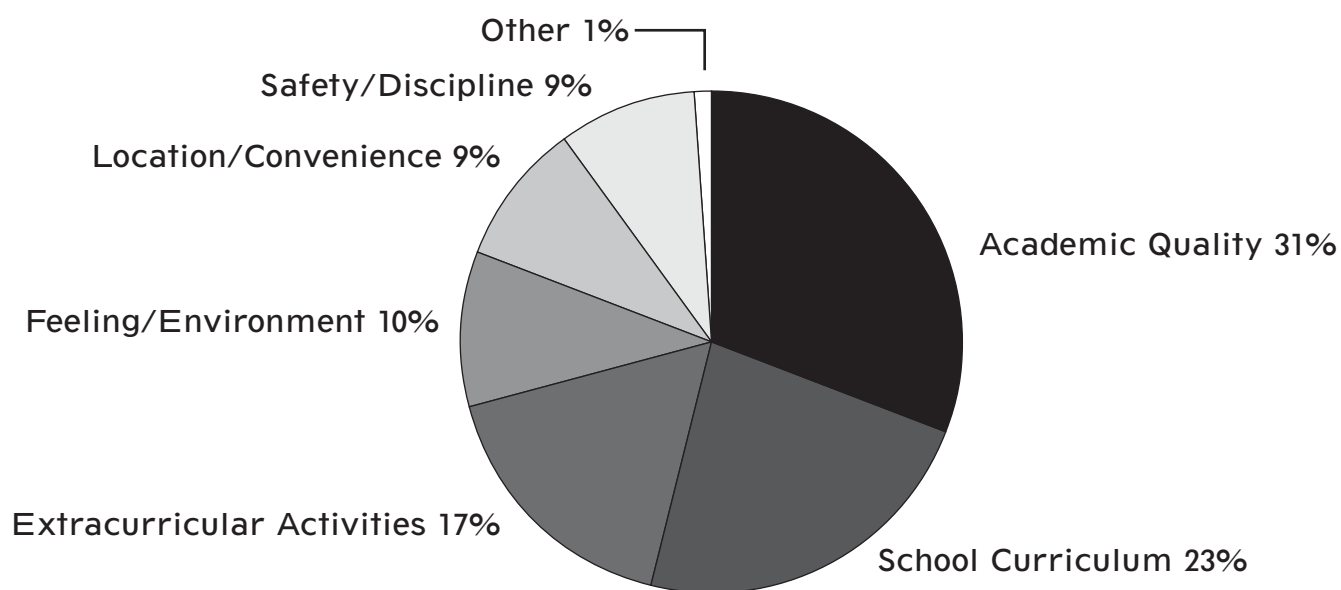
The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.

9. If it was your decision and you could select any type of school, what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child? _____



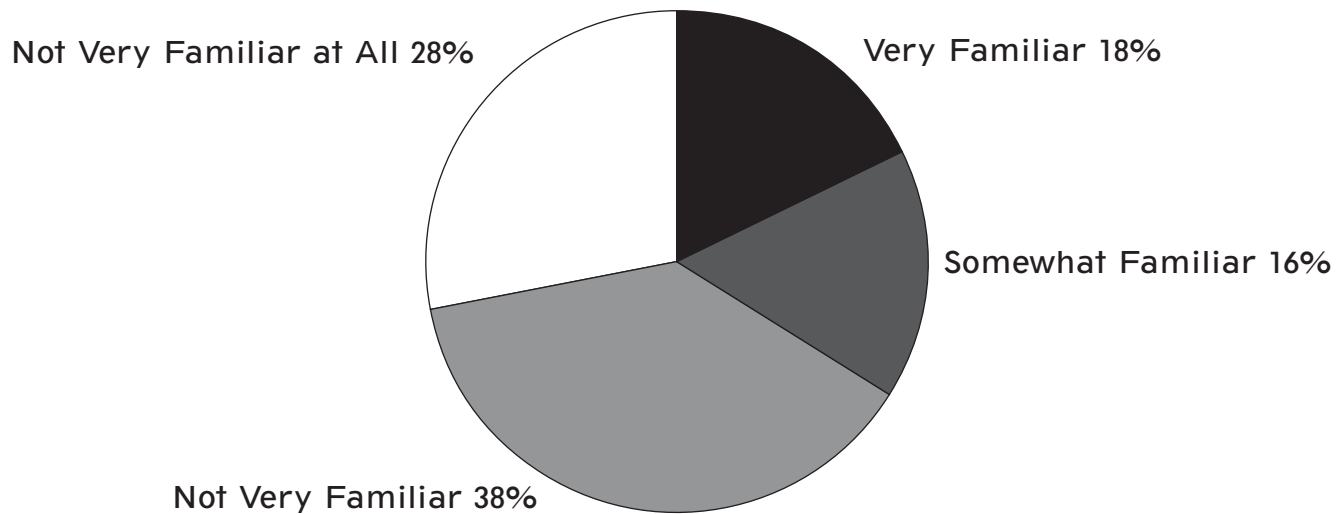
The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.

10. Why would you select [answer from question 9] for your child? _____

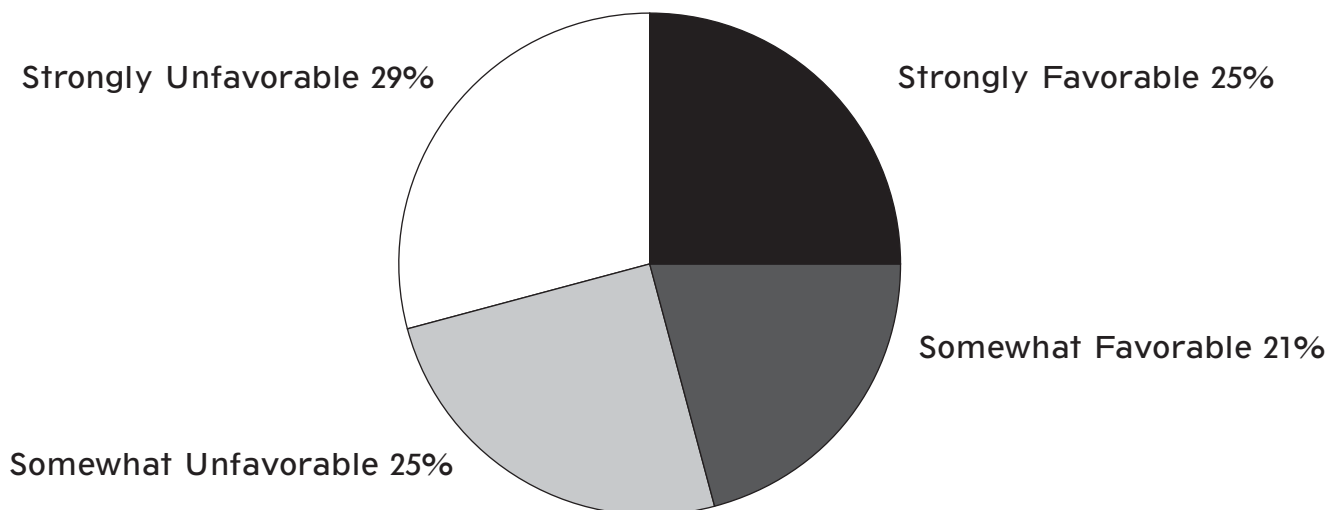


The order of the possible responses was rotated to avoid bias.

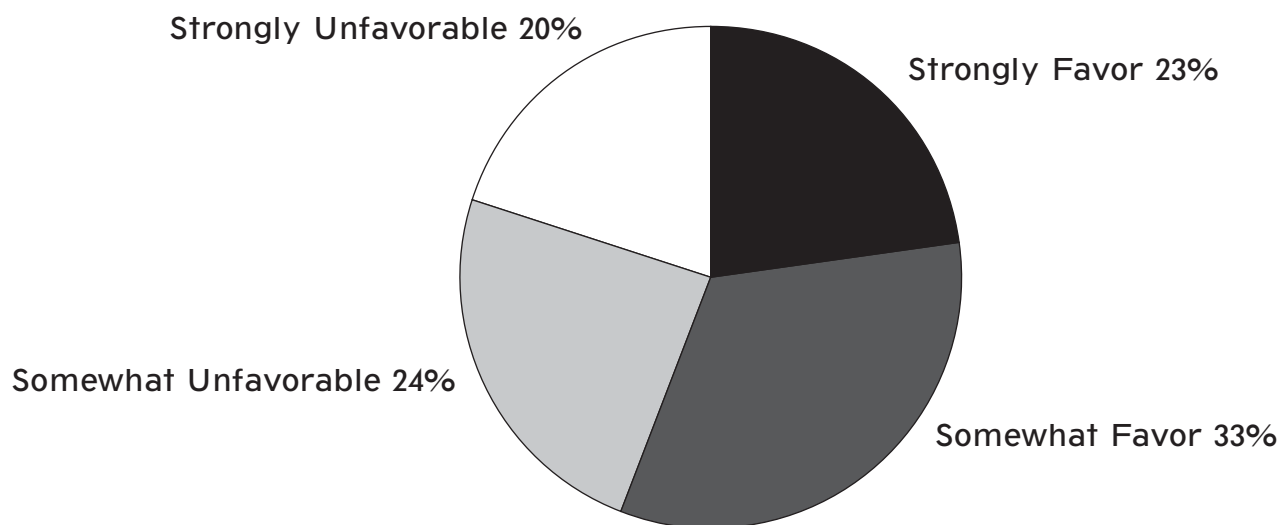
11. How familiar are you with charter schools in K-12 education? _____



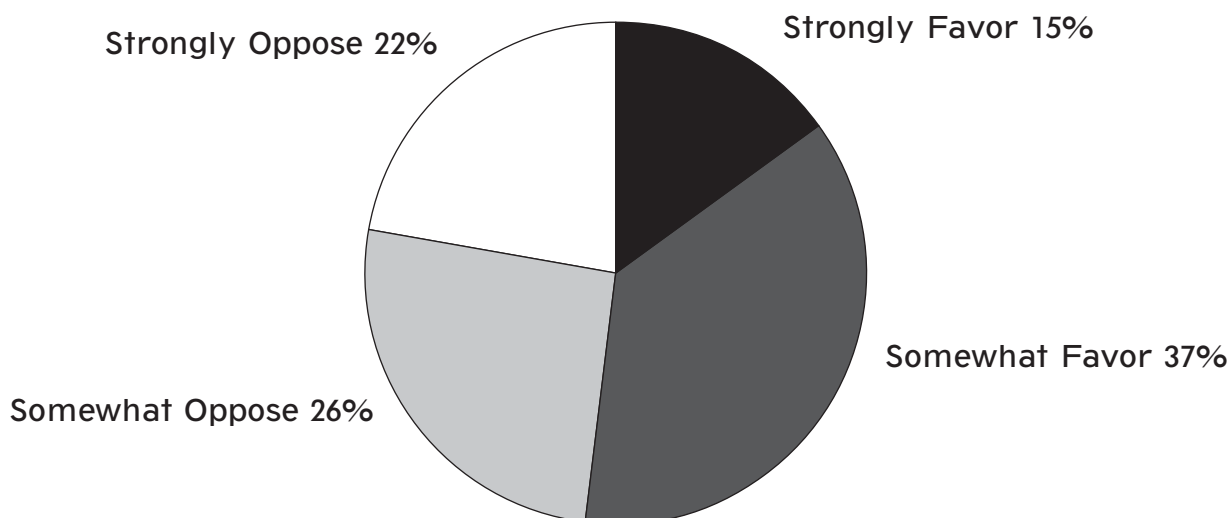
12. Charter schools are public schools that have a lot more control over their own budget, staff, and curriculum, and are free from many existing public school regulations. In general, do you favor or oppose this idea? _____



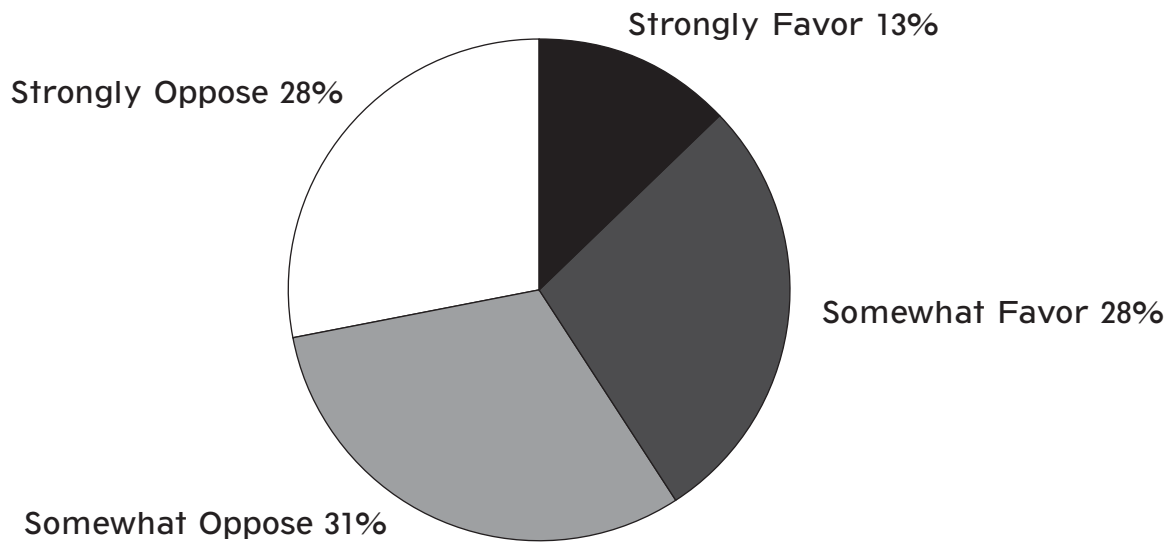
13. If a private school offered the best education for a particular child, would you favor allowing parents the option of using public funds to send their children to a private school? _____



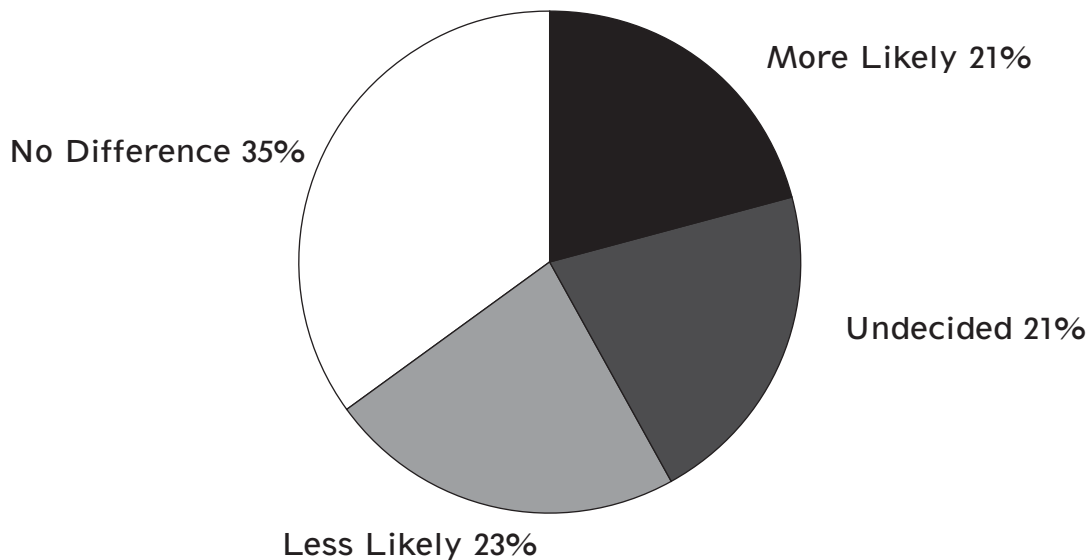
14. Some states give businesses a tax credit if they contribute money to fund private school scholarships. This policy is called a "tax-credit scholarship". If a proposal were made in Tennessee to create a tax-credit scholarship system, would you favor or oppose such an idea? _____



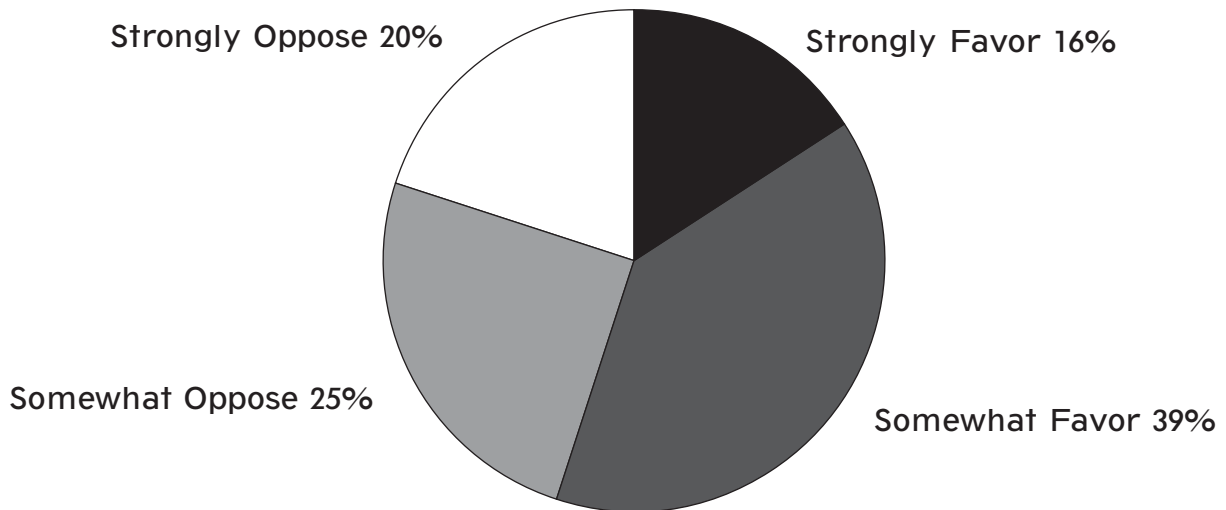
15. Some states have a different form of tax-credit scholarships, in which the scholarships are funded by contributions from individuals rather than businesses. If such a proposal were made in Tennessee, would you favor or oppose such an idea? _____



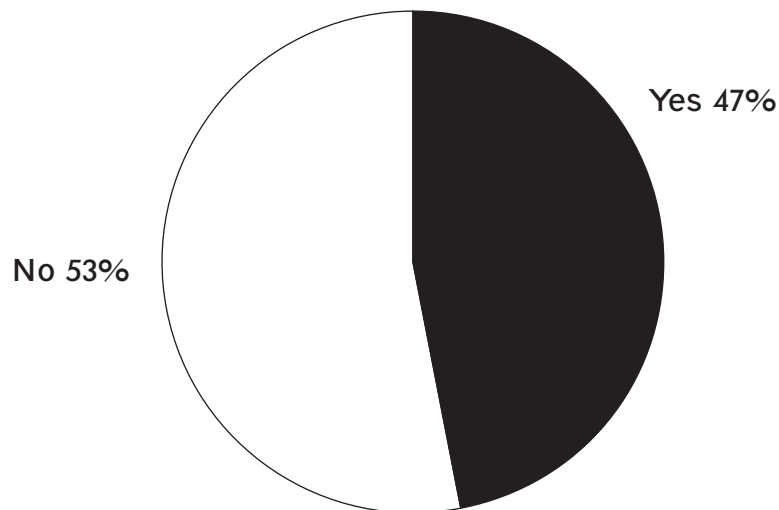
16. Thinking ahead to the next election, when a candidate for Governor, State Senator or Representative supports tax-credit scholarships, would that make you more likely to vote for them, less likely to vote for them, or make no difference whatsoever in your selection of candidates? _____



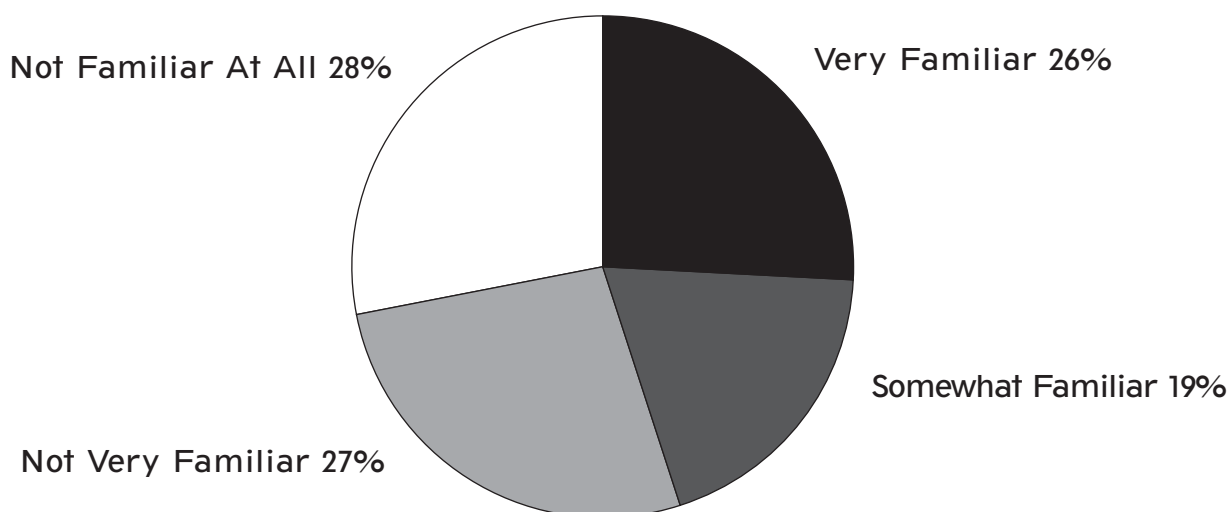
17. Some states allow parents of children with special educational needs to use publicly funded "special needs scholarships" to help pay for the private school or public school where they choose to send their children. If a proposal were made in Tennessee to create a special needs scholarship system, would you favor or oppose such an idea? _____



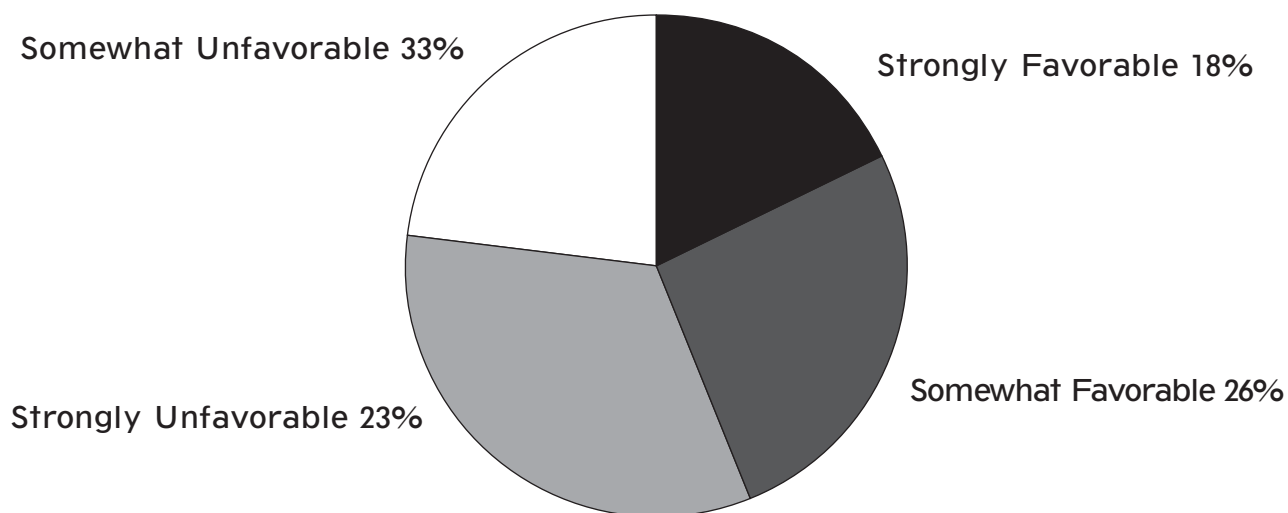
18. Have you heard anything about the use of school vouchers in K-12 education? _____



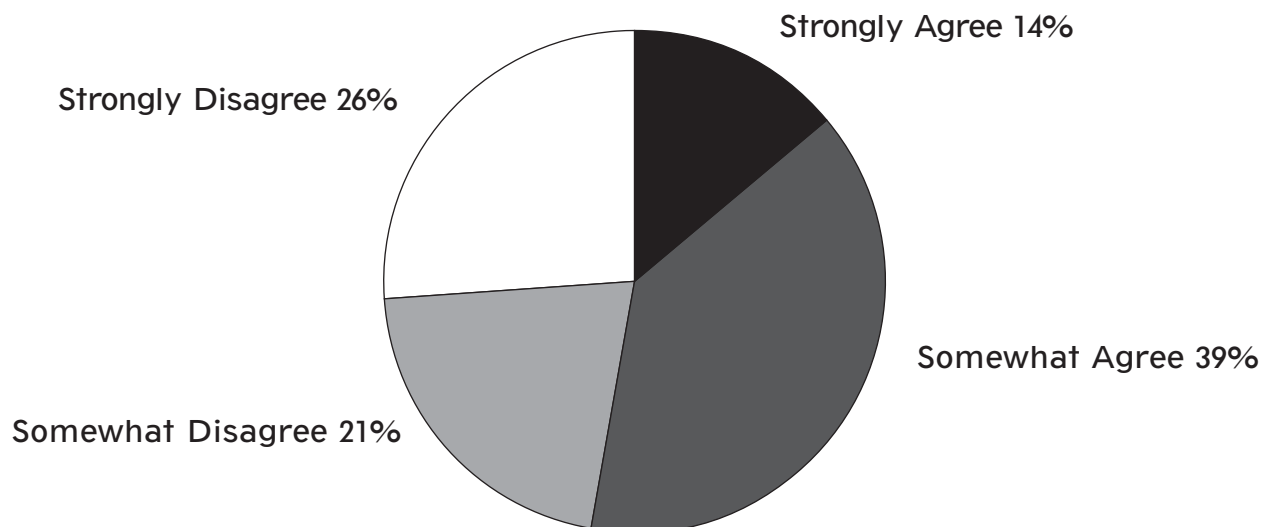
19. In Tennessee there is a debate over the direction of K-12 education. Some people promote an approach that would allow parents the option of sending their children to the school of their choice, whether that school is public or private, including both religious and non-religious schools. If this approach were adopted, tax dollars currently allocated to a school district would be allocated to parents in the form of a school voucher to help pay for the school where they choose to send their children. How familiar are you with this approach to education? _____



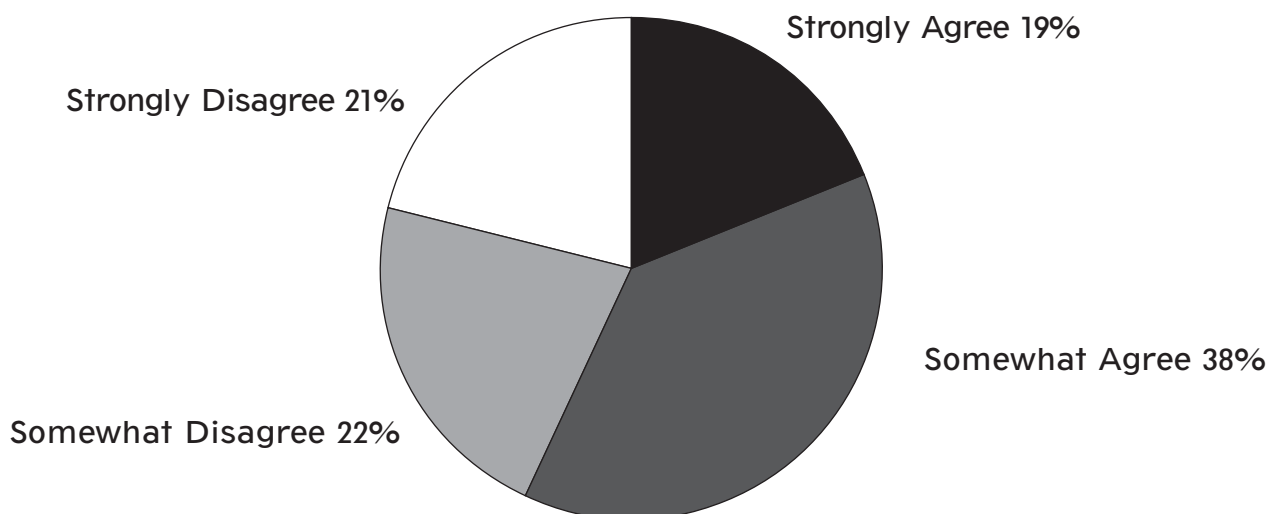
20. Based upon what you know about school vouchers, would you say that you are personally favorable or unfavorable towards this approach? _____



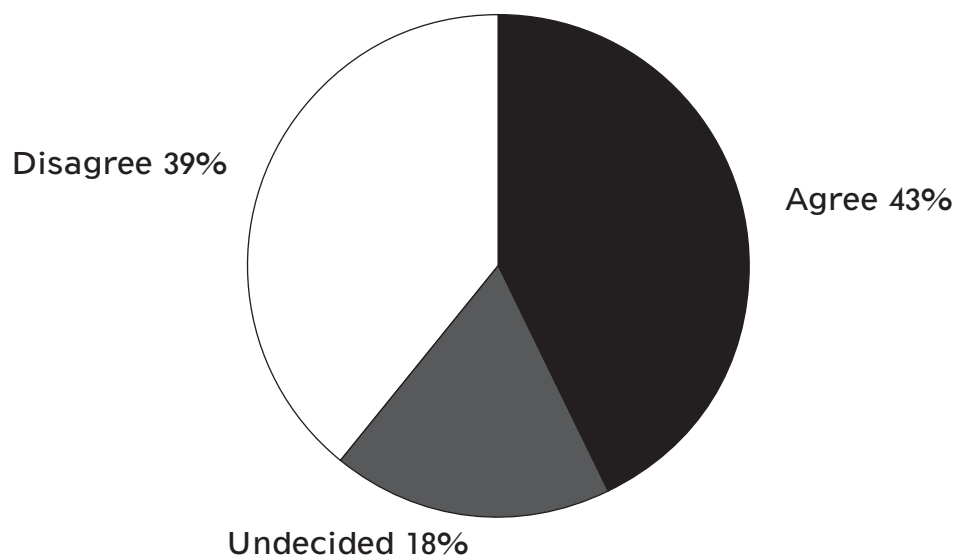
21. Some people believe that school vouchers should be available to all families, regardless of incomes and special needs. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? _____



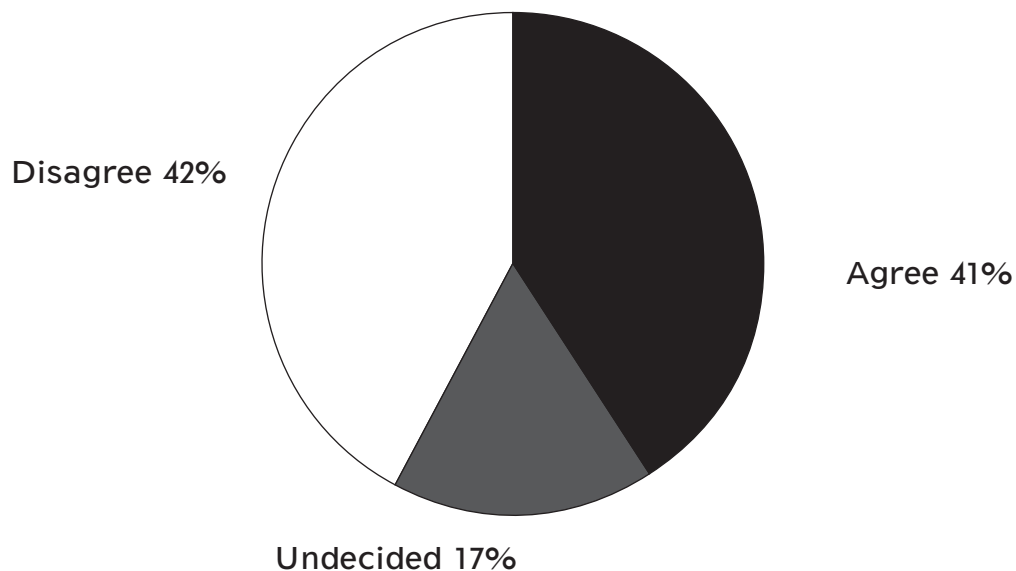
22. Some people believe that school vouchers should only be available to low-income families, to families with special education children, or to families with children in failing public schools. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? _____



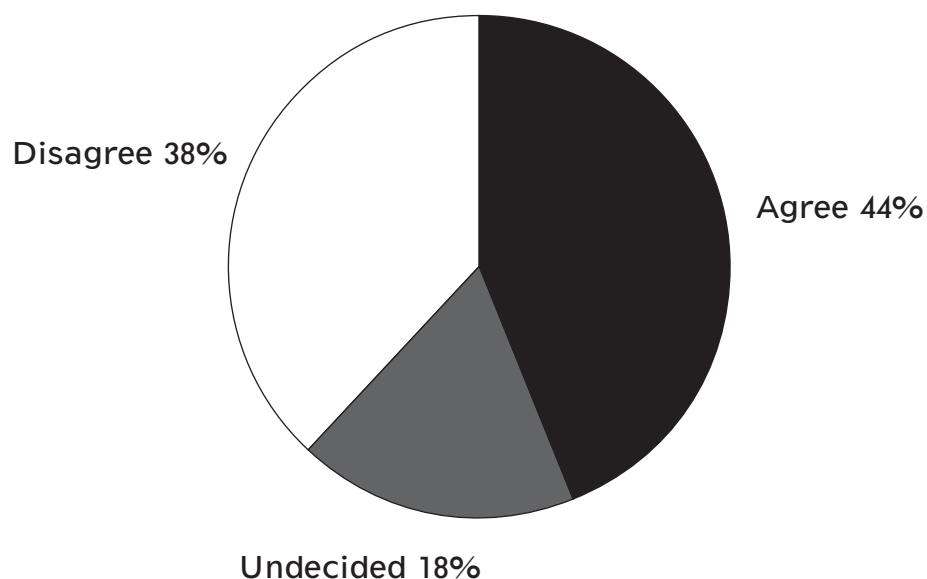
23. One argument in favor of a school voucher system is that public schools and private schools will get better because they will have to compete with each other to hold onto students. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? _____



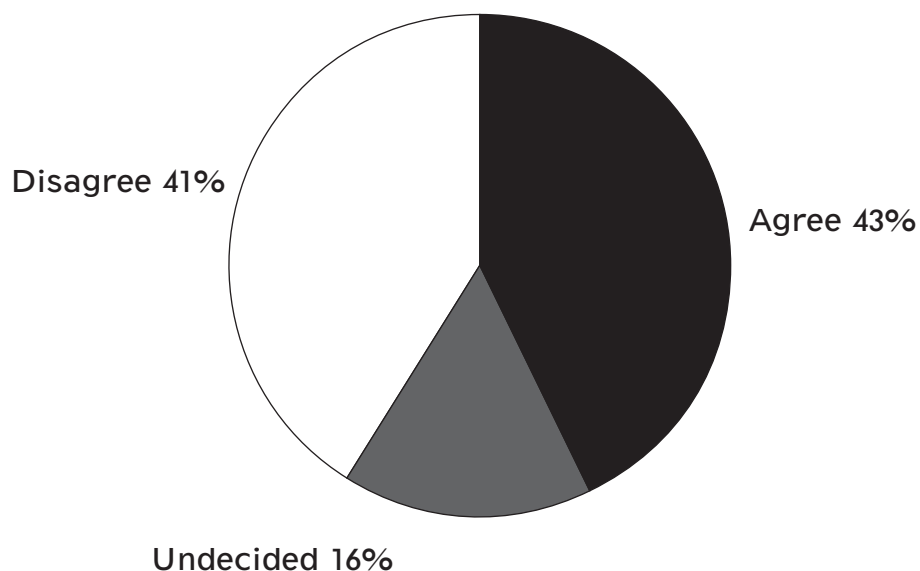
24. One argument against school vouchers is that they will make the public schools worse because they will be left with less money for operations. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? _____



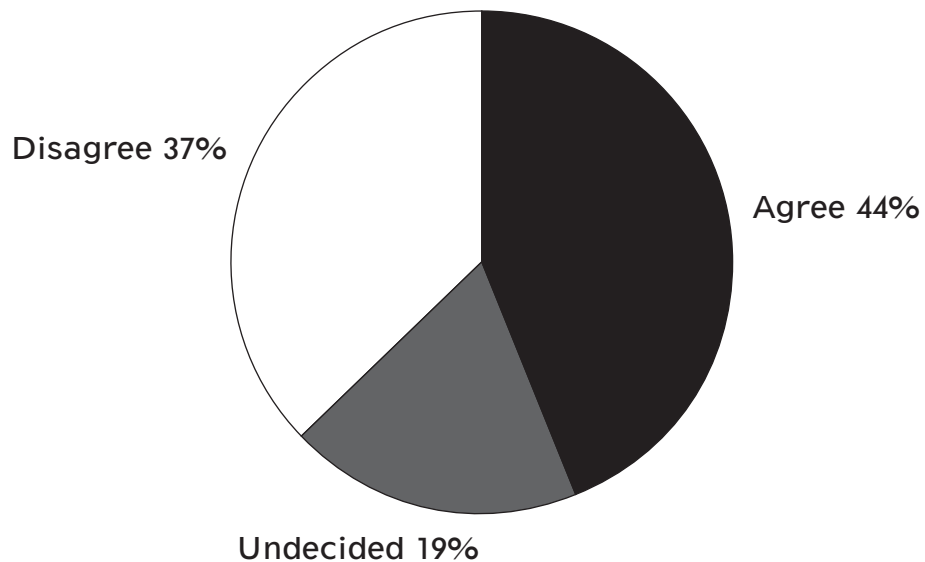
25. One argument in favor of school vouchers is that they are a lifeline for a child who can escape an ineffective, failing public school. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? _____



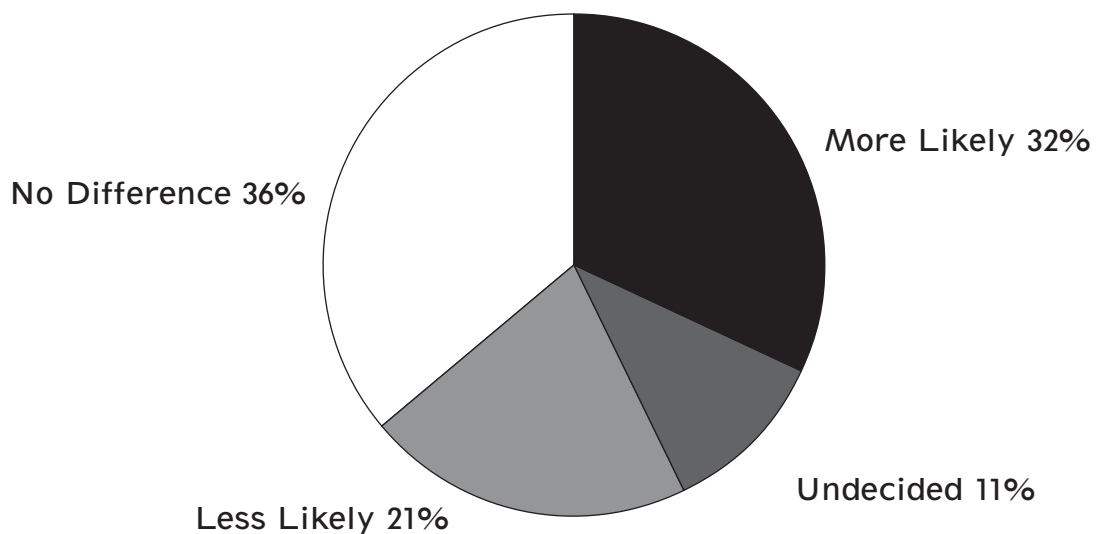
26. One argument against school vouchers is that they will help only a few kids and make things worse for students left behind in regular public schools. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? _____



27. One argument in favor of a school voucher system is that it will motivate principals, superintendents, and school boards to be more responsive to requests made by parents. Would you agree or disagree with that statement? _____



28. Thinking ahead to the next election, when a candidate for Governor, State Senator or Representative supports school vouchers, would that make you more likely to vote for them, less likely to vote for them, or make no difference whatsoever in your selection of candidates? _____



Demographics

ARE YOU CURRENTLY THE PARENT OR GUARDIAN OF ANY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN IN GRADES K- 12?

Yes	61%
No	38%
Don't Know	1%

WHAT AGE GROUP DO YOUR CHILDREN FALL INTO? [IF "YES" TO PREVIOUS QUESTION]

Under	11%
6-10	19%
11-14	28%
15-18	26%
Combination	16%

ARE YOU REGISTERED TO VOTE AS A:

Democrat	44%
Libertarian	2%
Republican	42%
Other Party affiliation	1%
Independent/No Party affiliation	11%

IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING AGE CATEGORIES DO YOU FALL?

18 - 25	8%
26 - 35	13%
36 - 45	25%
46 - 55	30%
56 - 65	17%
Over 65	7%

IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES DOES YOUR TOTAL FAMILY INCOME FALL?

Under \$25,000	9%
\$25,000-\$49,999	20%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	37%
\$75,000 - \$150,000	18%
Over \$150,000	16%

ARE YOU:

African-American	17%
Asian	1%
Hispanic	4%
White	77%
Other	1%

ARE YOU:

Male	49%
Female	51%

THE FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION WELCOMES YOUR SUPPORT

As a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, we rely solely on the generous support of our donors to continue promoting the Friedman's vision for school choice throughout the country. Please send your tax-deductible gift today and help interject liberty and choice into our education system. Giving parents the freedom to choose the school that works best for their children is our goal, and with your help we can make it happen.

Dr. Milton Friedman, Founder
Nobel Laureate and Founder of the Friedman Foundation

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Tennessee Center for Policy Research

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www.tennesseepolicy.org

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